

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL FOR UNIT 16Aii COMPUTING (FRANCHISED PROVISION) AT QAHE.

1 February 2019

PRESENT:

Professor Heather Farley, Associate Dean (Education), Ulster University Business School (Chair)

Dr Michaela Black, Head of School of Computing, Engineering and Intelligent Systems, Ulster University

Professor Chris Nugent, Head of the School of Computing, Ulster University

Professor Andrew Crampton, Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning), School of Computing and Engineering, University of Huddersfield

Dr Silvester Czanner, Principal Lecturer, School of Computing, Mathematics and Digital Technology, Manchester Metropolitan University

Professor David Barr, Head of School of Education Ulster University

Miss Jelena Ceckmeniova, Student Union Representative QAHE

IN ATTENDANCE:

Professor Paul Hanna, Faculty Partnership Manager (QAHE)/Associate Dean (Global Engagement), Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment

Ms Debbie Troy, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

The panel was convened to consider the following franchised provision at QAHE:

- Unit 16B1b– BSc Hons Computing Systems (FT/PT, London campus)
- Unit 16Aii – MSc Professional Software Development (FT/PT, London campus)

BSc Hons Computing Systems

The BSc Hons Computing systems was re-introduced for delivery at QAHE's London campus from September 2016. The course was originally developed to support expansion and diversification into international markets.

The part-time mode is being introduced at QAHE, using the Variable Rate Progression (VRP) model. In addition, an optional placement year is being introduced for students on the full-time programme at QAHE.

MSc Professional Software Development

The MSc Professional Software Development was first introduced for delivery in full-time mode only at QAHE's London campus from September 2017. There are currently two intakes to the full-time programme and three to the part-time. The overall aim of the course is to provide a broad education in computing to a level that prepares students for immediate employment in the computing industry or entry to another postgraduate computing course at Ulster or elsewhere.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

1. Course submission;
2. Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels;
3. QAA subject benchmark statement for Computing (2018) and Master's degree characteristics (2015);
4. Preliminary comments from Panel members.

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

3.1 Background and Rationale

The panel asked the senior team to outline how this course fitted within the overall portfolio for this subject area. QAHE was part of QA Company which was best known for its IT provision and the two programmes being revalidated were entirely compatible with that portfolio. It was the intention going forward to seek to leverage of some of the QA broader experience to further enhance these two programmes in terms of graduate employability. For QAHE, computing and IT provision had experienced a growth in recruitment with graduates from the BSc Hons Computing Systems progressing to Ulster Master's programmes and those from MSc Professional Software Development progressing to employment in a growth area.

3.2 Demand and Projected Intakes

The panel noted that some of the projected intakes proposed by QAHE fell short of the minimum viable cohort of 15 set by the University. The significantly increased projected total intakes were further noted and the panel enquired how these numbers would be supported. The senior team advised that recruitment had been poor until September of this academic year and that the January 2019 intake had also increased considerably. The overall approach to marketing had been refreshed and relationships with agent networks, both within the UK and internationally, had also been reviewed. All marketing teams had been well briefed in relation to the changes to the curriculum. A dedicated in-house marketing team with whom academic teams worked closely was now also in place. All of these changes combined with the introduction of a placement year in the BSc Hons programme and the flexibility of the proposed Variable Rate Progression (VRP) module had resulted in increased numbers.

The senior team explained to the panel that the predicted growth in numbers was due to all of the reasons discussed and the fact that they were already seeing positive changes in this regard, not least the cohort of 16 for the January intake – an intake which has historically been lower than that for September. They also hoped to maximise applications through the alumni network. Although agent networks were currently not sending computer graduates directly to QAHE, it was hoped that going forward QAHE would now be in a position to change this with a view to increasing intakes through these channels. It was difficult to confirm how the cohorts would be comprised in terms of home and international students but recruitment would certainly comprise a mix of both.

The Panel suggested that networks such as those available through QA Consultancy and Network London should be explored by the team to assist with marketing and recruitment for the courses, in particular in terms of upskilling employees.

3.3 Staff Development

The panel enquired as to the staff development strategy in place to ensure synergies with the Ulster team. The senior team advised that the QAHE Faculty currently comprised forty

members of staff. The Ulster team provided assistance in relation to advice and guidance around, for example, project supervision. In terms of staff development, many of the QAHE staff were research active, most had significant industrial experience which provided an enriched student experience and all staff had access to CPD days through their own professional accreditations and memberships. It was also noted that a further three staff had been recruited since the writing of the course document. Senior management were very supportive of all staff development and actively encouraged staff to undertake HEA fellowship. A more integrated approach to staff development and opportunities through the QA Academy was currently being developed and would be in place by September 2019. Access to a Level 7 Certificate in Professional Practice was also being introduced for staff. The formal staff appraisal system was used to identify staff development needs and this was also part of the role of the Dean of Faculty. Staff could also avail of developmental activities and courses through the QA Academy and examples of some of the courses undertaken were provided.

In terms of relationships between QAHE and Ulster teams, interaction occurred on a regular basis at course and module level as well as collaborations between and within teams in terms of building research clusters.

The senior team provided assurance that frameworks were in place to ensure that the courses were managed and quality assured appropriately, for example, through student feedback, course team meetings and through management and peer observation to identify and share areas of good practice across the teams. The panel stated that it was important to consider how staff were paired for observations as well as ensuring that observations were carried out across a range of activities.

3.4 Staff Resources

The panel enquired how staff contracts would be managed to deliver the provision over two semesters and was advised that a defined workload model was in place which was scaled downwards from full-time teaching to taking on other management roles. Staff were paid overtime to deliver in the evenings and some staff were already being recruited to work to different work schedules. The relevant checks and balances were in place to ensure that staff workloads were managed appropriately and it was pointed out that no staff were obligated to teach either evenings or weekends. They were also able to draw on a pool of approved associate staff on zero hours contracts which allowed staff to work when it suited. It was noted, however, that both courses were currently delivered day time only.

3.5 IT Resources

The senior team confirmed that a dedicated IT role at QAHE worked closely with their Ulster counterparts and ensured that all aspects of the programmes in terms of software and images replicated what was available for students at Ulster.

4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The panel met with a group of five students from across both programmes. During discussions around issues including the courses, student experience and resources, the following was noted.

- There were no issues in relation to use of the flipped classroom, lectures delivered by video or use of BlackBoard Learn in general.
- Students confirmed that the two consecutive days per week on campus worked well around other work and family commitments.
- The level of support from staff was good – this included the Course Director, the Academic Community of Excellence (ACE) Team and lecturers. Staff were accessible and

approachable and were available to meet with students to address any issues which arose or signpost them to other relevant support areas.

- The ACE Team was highly commended by students and provided support on academic writing, study skills, examinations and assignments as well as carrying out research.
- Each cohort had a class representative through whom issues could be channelled to the Course Team. Students generally tended to speak directly to individual lecturers and issues would be addressed in this way.
- Access to laboratories and availability of resources including library, journals, computers, software was good.
- Students were able to download free software onto their own device and a laptop loan system could also be availed of.
- An extended induction took place over two days at the start of the course which provided students with information on all aspects of the course, assessment, the institution, and support and guidance.
- Students had chosen the BSc Hons Computing Systems and QAHE on the recommendation from friends who had also studied there. The MSc Professional Software Development programme was chosen due to its one year duration and the fact that you did not need to have a computing background.
- The first year students confirmed that the introduction of an optional placement year was very much welcomed and that they would most likely choose to undertake it. It would provide good employment experience prior to final year and increase their employability on graduation.
- Those on the MSc programme had not yet received any details on the project or their supervisor.
- Students on both programmes had found the final year or final semester of their course quite challenging. In the MSc, modules were delivered over six weeks and in that time three assignments per module were required. A reduction in the workload would be welcomed.

The panel thanked the students for attending and wished them well in their future studies and careers.

5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

5.1 Course Delivery

The reduced face-to-face contact time in the MSc course, replaced by video lectures, had now been operational at QAHE since September 2018. The panel sought the views of the team as to how this was working to date. The team stated that this course was aimed at students from a non-computing background and comprised a mix of Level 6 and 7 modules. An extended induction was provided for students, including the use of blending learning and the flipped classroom. The extensive use of technology and the flexible learning environment was introduced from the outset, not least to develop and encourage independent learning.

It was noted that students were on campus two days per week and the panel enquired if this provided sufficient practice time to meet the demands of the programme. The course team explained that additional online time was allocated where students could access lecturing staff for support and guidance and this also contributed towards total student contact hours. Staff also ran an optional pre-semester boot camp to provide support to new entrants. It was not unusual for students to be working three days and on campus the other two but the team assured the panel that overall high levels of student performance demonstrated that students were putting in sufficient work to meet the demands and expectations of the course.

In relation to supplementary material provided to students prior to class, the course team advised that measures were in place to track online student engagement. The level of

participation and engagement in class also demonstrated how well prepared each student was. Online discussion boards were also available which allowed students to interact and engage with their peers. Videos were accessible to all students which set out the expectations of each module and the learning outcomes.

In relation to the delivery of the new curriculum, for example, Artificial Intelligence, the team advised that the Faculty comprised of fourteen staff and development and opportunities for upskilling were always available. They were also able to draw on a pool of associate lecturers to cover any particular specialist topics.

5.2 Student Support

The course team advised that small cohorts facilitated one-to-one support at times convenient to the students as this could be done online or face-to-face. The ACE team was available to all students to provide support in relation to issues including academic writing, study skills and carrying out research. BlackBoard Collaborate was also utilised to share videos and encourage engagement and interaction.

Diagnostic testing of all students was undertaken at the beginning of the course to establish each student's level of English language and academic ability and support could then be tailored to individual need. A timetabled academic skills module ran alongside the courses and assisted students with support on, amongst other things, academic writing and study skills. Student feedback demonstrated that this was well received.

In relation to the Master's project, the course team confirmed that students would be supported both face-to-face and through a dedicated support area on BlackBoard Learn. Project workshops would be held during the second week of this semester. In the interim, project supervisors were developing a number of potential areas to assist students with their choice of project. Staff were experts in their fields and very well equipped to support students in choosing their project and guiding them through the whole process.

5.3 Course Structure

The panel enquired how the team had found the changes to the BSc Hons Computing Systems course since September and was advised that the introduction of the optional placement year had really boosted numbers. The good range of content within the course and the exposure to a wide range of areas, in particular the much welcomed new Artificial Intelligence module, also made the course very competitive in the market. The revised curriculum and the introduction of the new Variable Rate Progression (VRP) model showed a closer link between modules and this was welcomed by students.

QAHE and Ulster colleagues enjoyed a good working relationship with discussion already having taken place around the practical nature of some of the provision. Some changes had already been introduced and these were very much suited to the computing environment in terms of student employability.

The panel noted the intention to deliver the undergraduate programme over two semesters at QAHE rather than the three semesters at Ulster and enquired how this would work operationally, including the impact on student workload. The team advised that they already had experience in delivering a two semester model and this worked well. The VRP model was very student centred would also allow students to pace their own study which welcomed by the team and students alike. It was also envisaged that QAHE would use the Ulster web app when it was available.

5.4 Placement

The panel asked the team to set out how students were supported in terms of selecting a placement and throughout all stages of the placement process. The team explained that support was available to all students from the outset in terms of CV preparation and interview skills. Preparation for placement was first introduced in year 1 during the careers induction. A six member careers team was now in place on-campus as well as an internship manager who could assist with arranging interviews with employers. The academic module leaders also provided ongoing support for students in relation to choice and suitability of placements. QAHE was very fortunate geographically in respect of the level of access to SMEs and other potential placement providers.

It was anticipated that the uptake of placement by students would be high, and by international students in particular (from experience, in the region of 80%), who the team would expect to undertake the four year programme.

The panel noted the value and contribution of students to an employer could not be underestimated and that this warranted being paid. Unpaid placements should be avoided where at all possible.

5.5 Student Experience

The extensive industry experience of the staff team as well as the use of real case studies in modules, greatly enhanced and enriched the curriculum and the student experience. The course team informed the panel that a structured guest lecture programme was also in place which allowed students to build on their own knowledge and transfer this to practical and professional topics. This developed independent learners and critical thinkers.

Staff ensured that students had access to a wide range of supplementary material which was widely utilised by students – this also helped students to develop professionally. The course team recognised that many students were not from traditional academic backgrounds and ensured that they were supported in every way.

5.6 Relationship with Ulster

When asked, the team provided the panel with a number of examples of how they worked collaboratively and successfully with Ulster colleagues on a day to day basis. This included joint course team meetings, staff/student consultative meetings and module co-ordinators linking up at the start of each semester. Moderation was also undertaken with Ulster staff with an online module area set up where documentation would be uploaded and jointly accessible. There were also opportunities for student feedback which would inform course development.

Interaction with Ulster colleagues took place on a regular basis, and staff were available as required in terms of providing support and guidance on a wide range of issues as well as sharing good practice. The course team stated that increased interaction would be very welcomed and suggested having a joint away day.

5.7 Electronic Assessment and Feedback

The team confirmed that coursework was submitted and feedback provided to students electronically through BlackBoard Learn, in line with University requirements. Turnitin was used and the Ulster Policy on Plagiarism was also implemented. A Head of Academic Integrity had recently been appointed which covered all QAHE partners which demonstrated their commitment to, and the importance of, this area.

5.8 Accreditation and HEA Fellowship

It was QAHE's intention to seek BCS accreditation, as this currently only applied to the Ulster programme. Similarly, all staff were encouraged to gain HEA fellowship as many had already done.

The gender balance of the team and the student cohort was noted and the panel enquired what steps were being taken to try to address this. The team advised that the team comprised a number of female colleagues who were not present but that the gender imbalance in the sector in general was recognised. They had attended a Women in IT conference and were keen to make further progress in this area going forward. The MSc programme in particular brought opportunities to attract female students into the field and these should be maximised.

5.9 Retention

The panel enquired as to the retention strategy in the faculty and was advised that a student attendance monitoring system was in place which incorporated a number of triggers in the event of a drop in attendance to alert staff who could then take the necessary action to address the issue. Attendance for all students was very closely monitored, and in particular for international students on Tier 4 visas where welfare and other support would be triggered systematically and academic staff alerted.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the programmes on the following:

- i) The coherent student support process including the ACE Team, student welfare and Career Development as well as the timetabled study skills module which is embedded into all courses;
- ii) The engaged and enthusiastic course team;
- iii) The excellent student-centred experience and spaces;
- iv) The positive steps being undertaken to increase demand and grow student numbers.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programmes be approved for a period of **four** years (intakes September 2019/20 to 2022/23 inclusive) subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office **by 15 March 2019** for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

BSc Hons Computing Systems

	Mode of Attendance	Year of 1 st Intake	Year of 2 nd Intake	Year of 3 rd Intake	Year of 4 th Intake	Year of 5 th Intake
Maximum cohort size for each site recommended by Faculty	FT	60	60	60	60	60
	PT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Minimum cohort size for each site recommended by Faculty	FT	15	15	15	15	15
	PT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

- ***These numbers are split across a September and a January intake, so the “cohort” size will be below the maximum cohort size proposed of 60.***

MSc Professional Software Development

	Mode of Attendance	Year of 1 st Intake	Year of 2 nd Intake	Year of 3 rd Intake	Year of 4 th Intake	Year of 5 th Intake
Maximum cohort size for each site recommended by Faculty	FT	60	60	60	60	60
	PT	60	60	60	60	60
Minimum cohort size for each site recommended by Faculty	FT	15	15	15	15	15
	PT	15	15	15	15	15

- ***These numbers are split across a September and a January intake, so the “cohort” size will be below the maximum cohort size proposed of 60.***

Conditions

- That all issues identified by the Academic Office and detailed in the appendix to the panel report are addressed;

Strong Recommendation

- That the University minimum viable cohort of 15 students is met for each intake in each course (section 3.2 refers);

Recommendation

- That the QA Consultancy and other networks are maximised in relation to student recruitment and provision of paid placements (section 3.2 refers);
- The panel was very supportive of a joint Ulster/QAHE team reflection and planning event and that this should be taken forward (section 5.6 refers);
- To ensure that all staff, especially part-time, take up some of the development opportunities made available through the QA Academy (section 3.3 refers).

7 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel, in particular, the external members, and the Course Team for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process.